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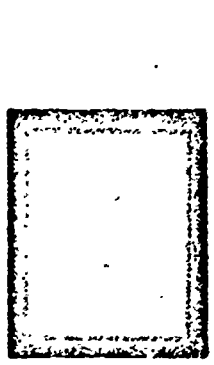
ALTHOUGH AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE IS NOT EQUAL TO THE BEST OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, THERE ARE NEVERTHELESS VALID REASONS FOR ITS INCLUSION IN THE LITERATURE PROGRAMS OF AUSTRAILIAN SCHOOLS. IT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT THAT AUSTRALIANS HAVE SOME UNDERSTANDING OF THE EMERGENCE OF THE SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN WHICH THEY LIVE. AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE IS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS OF DEVELOPING THIS HISTORICAL SENSE, AND CAN BE, IN TURN, A SIGNIFICANT AID IN UNDERSTANDING THE LITERATURE OF REMOTE COUNTRIES AND TIMES. THE STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE CAN ALSO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO INQUIRE FURTHER INTO THE "SPECIAL VALUE" OF LITERATURE, FOR INFERIOR LITERATURE IS FREQUENTLY THE STIMULUS WHICH LEADS STUDENTS TO BETTER LITERATURE. CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE HAS A PARTICULAR IMMEDIACY AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR STUDENTS AND CAN ENCOURAGE WRITING, READING, AND THE KIND OF INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY INHERENT IN BOTH. EXAMINATIONS ON SUCH MATERIAL, HOWEVER, CAN DESTROY ITS VALUE BY STIFLING AND CONDITIONING STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO IT. BY INCLUDING IN ENGLISH CURRICULA AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE, PARTICULARLY THE WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN WRITERS, TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CAN PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN CREATING AN ACTIVE, INTELLIGENT COMMUNITY INTERESTED IN BOTH ITS LITERARY HERITAGE AND ITS WRITERS OF TODAY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA," NUMBER 5, AUGUST 1967. (DL)

ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA



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Errata

On p. 44, 6 lines from bottom, read 'Spenser' for 'Spencer.' On p. 48, 10 lines from bottom, 'Geoffry' for 'Geoffrey.' On p. 49, paragraph 2, lines 4 and 6, 'judgments' and judgment' for 'judgements' and 'judgement.' On p. 51, line 1, 'FitzGerald' for 'Fitzgerald,' and similarly on p. 52, par. 2, line 4. On p. 51, par. 2, line 4 'seem' for 'seems.' On p. 52, 13 lines from bottom, 'course' for courts.'

LEONIE KRAMER

The Australian Heritage

Leonie Kramer is Associate Professor of English in the University of New South Wales. In this paper, she discusses questions of relevance to all young countries: how far is one justified in applying different, and lower, critical standards when assessing indigenous literature? In Australia, the battle is largely over. No student could come through a school and Honours English course, as she did only twenty years ago, with virtually no exposure to Australian literature. Again, the extremisms of the past have yielded to a more balanced view, in which it is no longer necessary to equate Furphy with Dickens in order to justify his inclusion in a course.

For this transformation, we can be grateful to a handful of educator/critics among whom Leonie Kramer is an outstanding spokesman. Her respect for fact and for the broadest critical standards is combined with a strong sense of the human context, a fact which emerges clearly in her published work on Henry Handel Richardson.

'The Australian Heritage' is a rather grand title for what is essentially an attempt to face some practical problems. It is also possibly misleading in its suggestion of exploitable riches. That we have riches to exploit in the literature of Australia I do not doubt. That they can be made the best use of within our present school or university courses is open to question. In a word, when I look at the place which Australian literature might occupy within the subject which we call English, I find myself indecisively poised between optimism and pessimism. My optimism is based on what might appear to be a naive faith that one can find ways of doing what one believes to be worthwhile and important. My pessimism is the result of increasing dissatisfaction with and concern about the confusion which bedevils discussions of the subject. At least some of the confusion, comes, I believe, from certain assumptions about the kinds of tests Australian literature should be expected to pass before being admitted to its parents' company; some comes from the assumption that once admitted, it should be shown to hold the same kind of interest and value as English

literature holds. And behind these assumptions is the persistent debate about relative values in literature as a whole. So in exploring this subject I am, at least to some extent, looking from a different vantage point at problems already raised by Professor Hope.

Perhaps I might begin, somewhat apologetically, with a little personal history. If someone had asked me twenty years ago whether I thought Australian literature should be included in school or university courses I should have given a confident and categorical 'no'. It would not have been a rational or well-informed negative, but it would have been easily enough explained. In my final honours year at the University of Melbourne there was a regular seminar on modern literature. Here I met for the first time Joyce, Auden, Spender, Robert Frost and I suppose others whom I can no longer recall. Here too I met what must have been the first Australian novel I had ever read (if one excludes those few met in childhood). It was Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. My reactions to it were immediate and violent. It appalled me. But what appalled me even more than the book itself was the sense of insecurity it gave me. By this time all of us, I suppose, flattered ourselves that we had acquired some powers of discrimination, some methods, however crude and tentative, for recognising merit. When I could see no merit, or very little in *Capricornia*, I felt as though the foundations of the world had been shaken. Surely, in an Honours English course, one met only the best. Had something gone wrong with my powers of discernment that I simply could not recognise the merits of *Capricornia*? It did not occur to me, or at least not immediately, to question the judgment of those who had prescribed it, though this would certainly have occurred to today's students, unless I am much mistaken. In the end, I decided that this was an academic joke, calculated to lighten our final year. What happened in the seminar confirmed that view, and persuaded me, incidentally, that there were no modern Australian novels worth reading.

Another set of experiences further confirmed this one—the Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures in Australian literature. As the light faded outside the grubby windows of the English classroom I sat and listened to what seemed interminable expositions of the merits of Australian writing. As the light faded outside, so it seemed to fade within. Before me were the images of writers I had read—Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Keats, Yeats, Spencer and the rest. Before me too were enticing but unknown images of many others still to be explored. But where was there time or incentive to discover these native scribblers, whose virtues sounded dreary and whose defects were clearly monstrous? In those days Australian literature suffered greatly at the hands of its friends. It is still not entirely safe from them.

No doubt my verdict of twenty years ago was harsh. Neither the subject nor those who presented it were as dead as they appeared to be. At the same time, could one seriously expect students who had revelled in some of the delights of English poetry to be equally content with Adam Lindsay Gordon? Or, and this is to put the problem another way, to devote precious reading hours to *Capricornia* instead of to unfamiliar English novels, or better still, European ones? To put the point bluntly, the Australian heritage at that time appeared, at least to one inheritor, distinctly slim, not to say dubious. It seemed in fact strictly analogous to our convict ancestry—a subject not to be mentioned too often and certainly not in the best company. Time, however, has lent some perspective to the subject, but not so much that we can suppose that the dilemmas I have mentioned no longer face us. The last thing we can assume is that Australian literature merely by existing, commands our attention as teachers. It might well engage our interest as students, but this does not entitle us to spread the gospel to which we subscribe in our own studies. In this as in any subject, there is a distinction to be drawn between our own interests and those, so far as we can assess them, of the world at large, the world which includes our students.

At this point I would ask you to lend yourselves to a literary and academic fantasy. The year is 1600, and we are interested listeners to, and perhaps participants in, an academic controversy. There has recently been established in England a new university. It is determined to break new ground in tertiary education, and its ambitions are worthy ones. It will offer courses not available in the old, conservative universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In particular, it wants to give its students an opportunity of studying the history and literature of their own country, believing, very properly, that while it is the business of a university to nurture a community of scholars, to keep alive the wisdom of the past, and to develop the spirit of free enquiry, it should also aim to bring to its students a greater awareness of the society in which they live. It would like to suppose that they will gain this awareness simply by studying in the traditional manner—and so they might. But it is anxious to experiment. Let us try to imagine the kind of discussion that might take place within the Department of English on the subject of the new syllabus. There are, of course, matters of principle to be established. Some raise the question whether, in George Puttenham's words:

> *there may be an arte of our English or vulgar Poesie, as well as there is of the Latine or Greeke.*

It is not an easy question to settle, but eventually it is decided that

while students must study the works of the great classical masters such as Homer and Virgil, the Roman satirists and the Greek dramatists, and their successors Mantuan, Sannazaro, Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso, they must also include in their course of study the works of important English writers.

Here the real difficulties are encountered. Who is to be considered worthy to occupy a place beside these giants of the past? In any such arguments the first appeal is to authority and precedent. Unfortunately, in this case, there is no precedent and authority is distinctly discouraging. One member of the English staff whose knowledge of his own literature is slight, hopefully appeals to Puttenham, but his professor sternly reminds him of Puttenham's verdict on English poets.

> *Many of our countreymen have painfully travelled in this part* (i.e. of poetry) *of whose works some appear to be but bare translations, other some matter of their owne invention and very commendable . . .*

Nevertheless Puttenham's list of poets worth mentioning is quite a long one, though it includes several translators, who, though worthy enough, would not earn a place on the course. Puttenham conveniently provides a short list, and from this one can take Chaucer, Gower, Harding, Langland, Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey, Vaux, Sidney, Spenser, Chaloner, Ralegh, Edward Dyer, Gascoigne. In tragedy there are Buckhurst and Ferrers, in comedy the Earl of Oxford and Edwards. This seems a promising start, but objections are raised against several of the candidates on the grounds that they do not reach a sufficiently high standard of performance. Further, Puttenham's critical acumen is open to question, and so the English staff appeals to Sir Philip Sidney for guidance. But alas, Chaucer for Sidney stands at the edge of a desert. After him he finds worthy of consideration only *The Mirror for Magistrates*, Surrey's lyrics and *The Shepheard's Calender*, and in drama *Gorboduc*, which is, he admits, faulty in important respects. His general verdict on the state of English poetry is much harsher than Puttenham's. Apart from the few examples he mentions he has seen in print few poems . . .

> *that have poeticall sinnewes in them: for proofe whereof, let but most of the verses bee put in Prose, and then aske the meaning; and it will be found that one verse did but beget another, without ordering at the first what should be the last; which becomes a confused masse of words, with a tingling sound of ryme, barely accompanied with reason.*

Our hypothetical English teachers of the year 1600 have to agree that with the exception of Chaucer, who, surprisingly, was able to see so

clearly in the *mistie time* at which he wrote, a course in English literature simply cannot match a course in classical and renaissance literature. Naturally, they take heart from Sidney's eloquently expressed conviction of the suitability of the English language for poetry of the best kind; but while supporting his hope for the future they are compelled to acknowledge that the English heritage is slight. Even if one were to accept Puttenham's full list, one has not enough material for a full English course.

I am sure I do not need to point the moral. In this year in this country we are in a position remarkably similar to that of my University of 1600. Sidney and Puttenham looked back over two hundred years of English poetry and drama. We can look back to, let us conservatively say, 130 years. We can describe, historically, a literary heritage. We can observe the Australian novel struggling with the peculiarities of a new environment and material, and we can talk about the immigrant novel, the convict novel, the pastoral novel, and stories of bushrangers, gold-rushes, depressions and wars. Our history is mirrored, however imperfectly, in our literature from the earliest times on. Or we can look at poetry, and see poets bred in the atmosphere of eighteenth century or early romantic landscape and meditative poetry, trying to develop their skills in a country where the immediate sources of their inspiration—namely the life about them and the appearance of the country—have no parallel anywhere in the world. Yet we can find much to interest us in Harpur, Gordon, Kendall and their successors.

What we cannot do, in my opinion, is assert that any of this early writing, upon which we would naturally draw in designing a course of study for serious students of literature, would by virtue of its *quality* earn a place beside the best English literature. With the best will in the world I do not think one can maintain that, for example, *Such is Life* ought to interest, *for its sheer value as literature*, people other than Australians. That it should *profoundly* interest even Australians I am sometimes disposed to doubt, but in saying that I am simply acknowledging a defective palate for the kind of novel Furphy offers and the form in which he offers it. Nor do I think we can maintain that Henry Handel Richardson's novels would, on their own merit, compete with the major novels of the French, Russian, and English traditions. In saying this, however, I am not also saying that they have therefore no place in literary courses. May I remind you that in my opening remarks I mentioned the confusion that comes from the kinds of tests Australian literature should be expected to pass before entering its parents' company. While passing the tests of quality and value would of course qualify it for admission, failing to pass those tests, or

merely scraping through them, would not in my opinion disqualify it.

This sounds like an invitation to open the floodgates, and stand aside while a tide of second-rate local works sweeps by into classrooms already flooded by the debris of other civilisations than ours. (That there is debris on many school and university literary courses, I feel I can assume to be a well-known fact.) I am not advocating a riotous bargain basement of Australian writing; rather I am arguing that we ought to be prepared to distinguish between the values involved in reading the best literature from any country, and the values involved in reading the best literature of our own past which might, admittedly, not always or often measure up in quality to the best of other traditions. It seems to me to be of increasing interest and importance to Australians to acquaint themselves with their past, whether through history or literature, and to have some understanding of the emergence of the society in which they now live. As a child I found Australian history as distasteful as I was later to find Australian literature; my own children on the contrary are interested in it. For them mediaeval history, the Wars of the Roses, and Charles I's fight with Parliament are eminently boring; while the reasons for convict settlement in New South Wales, and the career of William Charles Wentworth are exciting studies. My *argumentum ad hominem* is not intended to be turned into a generalisation about what all children or adult Australians like, let alone a recommendation about what they should like. But it seems to me that we have arrived at a point in time from which it is possible and profitable to look back, to try to understand our origins and present attitudes better. Well-selected texts, whether written in the nineteenth century or about it, can help students to this understanding, and can I believe, lead them also to understand areas of English history and literature which might otherwise appear formidable and remote. Is it, for example, fantastic to suppose that modern pupils, who find the sheer physical task of reading Dickens a daunting one, might find it less so if they were led back to Dickens through a knowledge of their own country? Even a simple contrast between the civilised pastoral world of *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, with its occasional bushranging excitements and lost children, and the grim but essentially more human world of *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*, might not only give them a greater understanding of Dickens, but at the same time a more intelligent appreciation of his power. Surely an Australian student who understood how and why his own country came to be settled, and how early Australian writers saw their country, would be better equipped to enter into the world of Dickens's novels?

What I am suggesting, of course, is that much of our older literature

might well be used primarily as an adjunct to historical or other literary studies; and this assumes a relationship between history and literature in the school course which unfortunately rarely exists. I am also suggesting that unexpected literary benefits might accrue through such a scheme. It is not to be supposed that the only way in which we develop powers of judgement in students is by presenting to them the best on one subject in isolation. I know that there are many people who would deny that literature ought to be used primarily, or even at all, for historical or sociological purposes. I respect their view, though I disagree with it. It is not necessary, or proper, to teach the best literature as though it were merely a handmaiden to history, sociology or economics. But there is a considerable quantity of literature, in Australia as in any other country, which falls below the best, but which should not, for that reason, necessarily be doomed to extinction. How many of us here could claim that our enthusiasm for literature has been aroused only by acknowledged classics? How many of us would have to admit that our appreciation of the best has sometimes come about through an awakening of interest in works which we might now recognise as secondary or even minor, but which, for some reason which perhaps we could not explain, led us further than they themselves ever went?

This is a way of saying that our assumptions about literature are often too simple and too demanding. It is all very well for a man such as Matthew Arnold to offer us classical touchstones for arriving at judgements as to what is the best that is known and thought in the world. Only a man of his learning and wisdom is likely to find such a method helpful, especially since it assumes the powers of judgement it sets out to define. It is unfortunately true, as Arnold implies, that to know what is best one needs to know what is best. It is also true that his view invites one to exclude Chaucer, Dryden and Pope from the class of the best, and demands a severity of judgement entirely allowable to those who share his knowledge and wisdom, but hardly possible to those of us whose task it is to develop in young people a love for literature. One of the problems that we face is the remoteness, for many of our students, of works which we have come to admire. If we can help them to overcome this sense of remoteness by introducing them to works by Australian writers, which, while not necessarily classics in their own right, yet are sufficiently interesting and stimulating to persuade them to enquire further, and so to come to an understanding of what we mean by the special value of literature, then I think we can justify their place in an English course.

So far I have been trying to discover ways in which Australian literature of the last century or the early part of this century might

justifiably be included in the subject we call English. Now I should like to return briefly to the university of 1600. I left it with a fairly slim course in English literature—something which, if we except Chaucer, might look rather like a modern option. A student could choose it as a short course if he wished. But the members of the 1600 English Department were not very happy with this idea. If they were to teach English literature at all, they felt, they must try to offer something more substantial, and something more immediately attractive than Puttenham's authors seemed to provide. So at this point the younger members of the Department began to suggest the names of modern authors who might have some claim to inclusion in the course. There is, for example, Donne. His satires are well known, much admired, and unusually interesting. There is Shakespeare, whose histories and comedies deserve closer attention than they can receive in any performance, however good it may be. There are Marlowe and Ben Jonson. There are many signs, in fact, that English poetry and drama are sailing out of the doldrums. Would not their students be excited by reading and discussing them? Would they not profit by exercising their judgement upon new works which have not yet settled into decent respectability or safe obscurity?

This is a tempting proposal, but it has dangers. The greatest problem for the University of 1600 is that, stimulating though these new authors might be, they are so productive that one can only make *ad hoc* judgements about them, which must inevitably lack perspective. It is one thing to look back at Chaucer, and from the safe distance of two hundred years analyse and pronounce judgement upon him. But what of a man like Donne? He shows promise, but his output so far is small. Perhaps he will not fulfil his promise. In any case, how could one accommodate him within the examination system? It is not difficult to devise suitable questions about Chaucer. One can ask, for example, whether Puttenham is right in thinking that in *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer *sheweth more the naturall of his pleasant wit, then in any other of his workes*, or whether it is true, as Puttenham asserts, that *his similitudes, comparisons and all other descriptions are such as can not be amended.* But is it sensible to try to ask such questions about a man like Donne, living among us, not as a fixed and complete literary entity, but as a changeable, experimental poet? Is it sensible? Is it right? Is it—dread question—academic?

Much the same situation, I would suggest, confronts us today when we look at Australian literature. At the time when the light was fading from the English classroom twenty years ago, a new member of staff was appointed in Melbourne. His name was A. D. Hope, and he, so we soon discovered, wrote poetry, though he had so far published

only in somewhat obscure journals. R. D. Fitzgerald had published two slim volumes; James McAuley one; Judith Wright one; Douglas Stewart one (if one excludes his New Zealand work). To read and judge them at that stage would have been like basing views upon Donne on his work to 1600. That any of them should have been included on a university course or school syllabus would have seemed absurd even to contemplate. Does it still seem absurd now?

I would say that it does not seem absurd, and that furthermore there are other names in poetry one would want to add to this list. One of the most exciting developments in Australia in the last twenty years has been the increase in poetic activity. Much of the poetry written in these years can and does reach an audience which is neither academic nor specialist. There is as much variety in the poetry itself as in those who write it; and if one meets, as unfortunately one still does, sufferers from Australia's endemic disease, the cultural cringe, an answer to them is certainly to be found in the variety and quality of modern Australian poetry. It is more impressive by far, so it seems to me, than is the Australian novel at the present time.

What we have seen in the last twenty years is in fact something like a flowering of literary talent. In order to explain this I do not think it necessary to invoke notions of maturity or nationhood, which always seems to ask more questions than they answer, questions whose relevance in any case is often doubtful. I do not think we are in a position to judge how much of what is being written now will survive. Predictions of this kind are more likely to be wrong than right, and in any case deflect interest from the real issues of literature. It stands to reason that when a great deal is being written more will be second-rate than first-rate. This has always been so, and always will be. The concern of any country at any time for its literature should not simply be a concern to discover geniuses. It should be a concern to encourage writing and reading, to encourage the kind of intelligent activity inherent in the approach of a reader to a writer, and of a writer to his work.

Therefore, if my University of 1600 had failed to take advantage of the growth in literary activity in England in the last twenty years of the sixteenth century I should have felt that it could not claim to be attempting to expand its students' awareness either of their own world, or of the world of literature in general. In the same way I would feel that if, in Australia in 1967, we do not take advantage of the flowering, especially of poetry, over the last twenty years, we too might well be thought to have settled into a complacent acceptance of the proved worthies of the past. What, in fact, do we officially do about Australian literature in the schools? The simple answer is

precious little. New South Wales does best. In the new fifth and sixth year syllabus there are included *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *The One Day of the Year*, some poetry by Judith Wright, and novels by Patrick White, Martin Boyd, Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark and Ernestine Hill. In the Western Australian matriculation syllabus for 1967 there is Peter Cowan's *Short Story Landscape*. South Australia has James McAuley's selection of his poetry, Kippax's *Three Australian Plays*, Boyd's *A Difficult Young Man*, and *Australia Felix*. Tasmania has the Douglas Stewart poems in *Six Voices*, and Louis Stone's *Jonah*. Victoria has nothing this year. So of the very considerable quantity of Australian literature, old and new, upon which demands could be made, we are able to find only a handful of authors of whom the current favourites seem to be McAuley, Stewart, Richardson and Boyd. It is not a very adequate representation of the present state of Australian writing.

When one looks at the school syllabus, however, it is not at all easy to see how Australian literature can win many more places. One would be reluctant to exclude Milton or Chaucer or Wordsworth or Keats and replace them by Fitzgerald and Slessor and Wright—or anybody else for that matter. Since our concern is English we must feel that it is important for our students to meet the great names of the English tradition. But I believe, as I have already suggested, that there ought to be a more important place assigned to Australian literature than there is. Is no compromise possible? Older literature I have already discussed. Modern literature, and especially contemporary literature, has a different kind of importance for our students.

Regrettably, what I'm now going to say is likely to appear as unrealistic as my fantasy about the University of 1600. Had I been a member of that hypothetical English Department, I should have felt extremely uneasy about admitting Mr Donne or any of his contemporaries to the courts, not because of doubts about their interest and merits, but because of apprehensions about their survival. I do not mean that when they saw their names in the University (of 1600) Calendar they would have been driven to self-destruction. I am sure they would not have acted so then, any more than poets do now. School and university prescription is, after all, grist to the mill. But I would have serious doubts about their continued survival in the lives of the students themselves, once they had been ground through the fine mincer of the examination system. Imagine the end of the first year of that experimental course. Students sitting the examination find these questions:

What evidence do you find in the satires of Mr Donne of the influence of classical satire? OR

'Donne, for not keeping of the accent, deserves hanging.' Discuss.

When they had produced their neat and unimportant answers to either of these questions, I wonder whether Mr Donne, their exciting contemporary, would have meant quite the same to them.

This must appear to be simply an argument about the examination system, and so in part it is. I am not clever enough, and neither, so far, is anyone else it seems, to find a way of making decisions about merit and quality without demanding some kind of test. But must we go on assuming that the examination machine should be permitted and even encouraged to chew up everything in sight? Have we the courage as teachers to decide that we will not allow it to assist at the gruesome operation of vivisection; that while it might be permitted to satisfy its hunger with canned, deep-frozen and clearly labelled fodder, we will not have it devouring living flesh? Is it not possible, in fact, for us to give our students the most recent and up-to-date Australian writing as part of their course, without demanding that they return it to us, conscientiously mangled, at the end of the year?

I know the difficulties that can immediately be raised, about reading time, crowded syllabuses, and so on. But at this moment I am concerned with possibilities, not simply with problems. There is, I believe, a special responsibility for us to make our students aware of the artistic life of their own community. Nowadays they have wonderful opportunities to read poetry while it is still hot out of the oven. Almost every Saturday the *Sydney Morning Herald* publishes new poems. Poetry magazines and literary journals keep up a steady supply. What could be more exciting and rewarding than for students to be invited to explore these as they appear, without the need to devise and store up pedestrian comments upon them against a day of reckoning? Not only do I believe that they should be encouraged in the classroom to do this kind of work (and I know of course that they are so encouraged by many teachers) but I also believe that it is simply wrong to subject the writing of living authors to the kinds of formal academic techniques we apply to those of the past. There is a difference between the writings of the past and those of the present, and it is important to preserve the difference. It matters that we do not require students to read early literature simply because it is old, but that we do for them a job they can't do for themselves—namely sort out what is best, and what has in all generations power to move the mind. From this they will learn, we hope, values and standards. They will meet some of the best that has been written in their own language over the last 500 or so years, and there is no substitute for this background for the student of English.

But to their own literature, and particularly to the literature of their

own time, of their own year and week, we should make a very different approach, because it is a different kind of subject. One reads one's own literature primarily to find out what one's contemporaries are thinking and doing, how they, with their special skills as writers, see the life about them, what they approve, what they disapprove, how their own experience affects them. We should not read them, in my opinion, primarily to decide whether they will be read, or ought to be read, in 500 years' time. *We* cannot decide this anyway. Only the 500 years can do that. But we can form opinions, express views, argue, criticise, find reasons for admiration or dissatisfaction. This is the kind of activity to which we all, I am sure, want to stimulate our students. What better way of doing so than by confronting them week by week with the intellectual activity of their own community? Here, though, we must stop. To formalise the study of contemporary literature any further, in particular to demand answers to examination questions, is unnecessary. It is also misleading, for to systematise and categorise, to ask questions to which there are presumably supposed to be right and wrong answers, is to assume in the study of modern literature a degree of certainty it simply does not have. I would go so far as to say that when we treat contemporary literature in this way we do in fact land ourselves in a contradiction. On the one hand we are presenting to students the great writers of the past who have survived the test of time and still speak with authority today, and this often involves us in bringing to life aspects of their work which might otherwise appear dead or unintelligible. On the other hand we too often treat contemporary writers as though they were dead already, and fit to be handed on in a neat parcel to a posterity which is then deprived of the right to do what *only* posterity can do. If we lend ourselves to this kind of premature classification we deprive our students of a proper view of contemporary literature as something alive, exploratory, fallible, just as likely to err as to triumph—in fact as something thoroughly human. So while I see it as our very demanding task to bring the past to life, I also see it as our responsibility to save the present from the paralysing hand of academicism.

Perhaps this is indeed fantasy. Perhaps it is too much to hope that we might escape, even briefly, from the examining monster we have created. But, as I said at the beginning, I think we can find ways. And lest it be thought that I am merely day-dreaming, I shall try to suggest how we might approach the task of benefiting from the Australian heritage and from the Australian present. Firstly, I think we should encourage correspondence between Australian history and literature, arguing, as I have done, that even secondary or minor literary works have a special value for their own country; that it is part of our

duty to show what that value is; and that in performing this duty we will, more often than not, also find ourselves drawing attention to the ways in which and the reasons why such literature falls below the best. This in itself is a lesson in the acquisition of values. It is a way of introducing to students nineteenth-century works that would otherwise find no place in their experience. Secondly, while I know that many teachers do themselves introduce to their students new works which are not included in the syllabus, syllabuses should give more formal recognition to modern Australian literature, by suggesting that part of the course should consist of the informal reading and discussion of the work of contemporary writers. Thirdly, there should be no examination whatever of this section of the course; so that students should perhaps come to realize that there are at least some educational activities for which bread-and-butter rewards and punishments are neither necessary nor appropriate. If we could implement even one of these ideas I feel sure we would brush away some of the cobwebs from the darker corners of our subject. That Australian writing would also benefit seems to me obvious. It has suffered in the past—and this is why I set down my own depressing memories—and it suffers still from a lack of lively controversy. It is not enough that teachers, academics, writers and critics should talk to each other in the often dry pages of literary journals. This is conversation which touches and interests only a very small minority in our community, and all too often it gives the impression of being kept alive by artificial respiration. An active, intelligent community interested in its writers (as many are interested in its painters already) does not seem to me an impossibility. If it did I should have ceased teaching long ago. So I give my vote to the Australian heritage and to the Australian present as appropriate educational voices; as I would have given my vote in 1600—in the face of every argument from the traditionalists—for Sidney, Ralegh, Donne, and even that *upstart crow* William Shakespeare.